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Counterfactual Reasoning in Foreign Policy Analysis: The Case of German Nonparticipation in the Libya Intervention of 2011¹

MISCHA HANSEL

Justus Liebig University Giessen

AND

KAI OPPERMANN

University of Sussex

The abstention of the conservative-liberal government under Chancellor Angela Merkel on UN Security Council resolution 1973 marked the first occasion in which the Federal Republic of Germany stood against all three of its main Western partners, the US, France, and the UK, simultaneously, on a major foreign policy issue. Many accounts of this decision invoke the influence of electoral incentives. What is problematic, however, is that the causal weight attached to electoral politics is often left ambiguous and difficult to assess with traditional case study methods. The article, therefore, employs counterfactual reasoning to scrutinize “electoral politics” explanations of Germany’s policy on Libya. Specifically, it develops counterfactuals in which decision making did not take place in the shadow of upcoming elections and investigates how other variables on different levels of analysis would have shaped decision making in the counterfactual scenarios. The findings suggest that electoral incentives did not decisively shift German foreign policy on Libya. More generally, the article speaks to the value of counterfactuals in foreign policy analysis.

Government decisions for or against participating in multilateral military missions are the focal point of a broader debate on change and continuity in German foreign policy since unification. On the one hand, the reluctance of German decision makers to commit to the use of military force has been seen as confirmation of the civilian power role concept (Harnisch 2001; Maull 2001; Risse 2004) and the continued relevance of the Federal Republic’s culture of military restraint (Berger 2002; Longhurst 2004; Malici 2006). On the other hand, post-unification Germany’s enhanced role in multilateral military interventions is given as evidence for the “normalization” of German foreign policy which is being portrayed as evermore power-conscious, assertive, and self-confident (Schöllgen 2000; Wagener 2004; Hellmann, Weber, and Sauer 2007). Thus, differences in the assessment of Germany’s record in contributing to international

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military missions are very much at the core of current controversies about the overall trajectory of German foreign policy.

This is true, in particular, for one of the highest profile cases of post-unification Germany's nonparticipation in military interventions of its Western allies, the 2011 NATO mission "Unified Protector" in Libya. The abstention of the conservative-liberal government under Chancellor Angela Merkel on UN Security Council resolution 1973 which authorized member states to "take all necessary measures" to protect civilians from the Gaddafi regime in Libya was likened to a "stab in the back" (Ash 2011) of Germany's allies and marked the first occasion since World War II in which Germany stood against all three of its main Western partners, the US, France, and the UK, simultaneously, on a major foreign policy issue. This unprecedented isolation of Germany on a major security issue was seen to revive "fears of Germany reverting to a semineutral stay-at-home strategy that could undermine the alliance" (Peel 2011), and the former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer was merely one of the most outspoken of many voices in the German debate when he ranked the government stance as "possibly the biggest foreign policy debacle since the founding of the Federal Republic" (Fischer 2011:26).

At the same time, there is no scholarly consensus about the main driving forces behind this highly controversial decision. The reasons advanced for the Merkel government's policy of abstention include the reduced weight given to considerations of alliance solidarity in the definition of the German national interest (Hellmann 2011:20–22; Miskimmon 2012); the changing national role conceptions of German decision makers (Oppermann 2012); a geopolitical re-orientation of Germany toward the emerging powers (Stephens 2011); the inexperience of foreign minister Guido Westerwelle and government miscalculations regarding, for example, the position of the Obama administration (Rinke 2011; Miskimmon 2012:398).

Many accounts of German decision making on Libya, moreover, seek to reinforce their causal narrative by implicit or explicit references to the domestic electoral interests of the liberal junior coalition partner, the FDP, in view of two forthcoming regional elections on 27 March 2011 (Bertram 2011; Hacke 2011:52; Maull 2011:112–113; Rühl 2011:565). Given polling evidence of widespread public opposition to any German participation in a military intervention in Libya (Oppermann 2012:515), the argument put forward is that the liberals and foreign minister Guido Westerwelle, in particular, tried to emulate the red-green government's 2002 electoral strategy and to turn around their domestic political fortunes by adopting a high-profile anti-war stance:

The abstention on UN1973 was partly an FDP electoral tactic in light of the upcoming state elections in Baden-Württemberg on 27 March 2011. With concerns that the FDP might not pass the 5 per cent threshold, Westerwelle calculated that an abstention would prove helpful. (Miskimmon 2012:399)

This tendency to "fortify" causal arguments about Germany's opposition to the military intervention in Libya by bringing in the electoral interests of the FDP, however, is unsatisfactory in two respects. First, the causal weight attached to the 'electoral politics' argument remains ambiguous. While the implicit assumption clearly is that German policy on Libya would have been different had it not been for the electoral interests of the junior coalition partner, how and to what effect these interests are said to have impacted on decision making is rarely spelled out. Rather, the "electoral politics" argument tends to be put alongside other explanatory factors, which are equally hypothesized as having caused Germany's abstention on UN1973. This, in turn, leads to an account of the decision in which the causal effects of different factors are impossible to disentangle (Ragin

2000:88–119). Second, the plausibility of the “electoral politics” argument solely rests on the congruence between the electoral interests of the Merkel government, in particular of the liberal junior partner, and the expected electoral repercussions of opposing mission “Unified Protector.” In other words, the assumption is that government policy must have been driven by electoral incentives, simply because these incentives appeared to suggest the policy that the government has selected. While this argument is inherently unfalsifiable, little effort has been made to show that electoral considerations have indeed played a role in government decision making.

Against this background, the objective is to probe into the difference “electoral politics” has or has not made to German foreign policy on Libya. The article does therefore not aim at testing different theoretical explanations for German nonparticipation. More modestly, it seeks to clarify the causal weight of one of the most often invoked single variables in such explanations (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994:119–121). This is relevant, first, because it contributes to a clearer analysis of the relevant drivers behind government decision making on Libya and thereby lays the ground for more comprehensive assessments of competing theoretical accounts of this decision. From a political perspective, second, it is crucial for any judgments on the sincerity or otherwise of the German government. Specifically, the ambition is to investigate whether the apparent congruence between electoral incentives and German foreign policy does indeed indicate a causal relationship between the two variables (George and Bennett 2005:181–192).

Traditional methods of tracing the factual decision-making process, however, are not well-placed to yield insights on possible causal pathways from electoral considerations to government policy, not the least because documents and accounts of decision makers are unlikely to reveal evidence for possible strategic electoral motives behind foreign policy decisions that would contradict the official government discourse. The article, therefore, takes up the methodological advice (George and Bennett 2005:184) to employ a counterfactual analysis as an alternative means to test the plausibility of imputing a causal link between electoral incentives and German foreign policy on Libya. More precisely, the research strategy is to construct two counterfactuals in which government policy on the issue is not formulated in the context of domestic electoral competition and to trace whether and how this manipulation of the antecedent brings about changes in the consequent, that is, Germany’s approach to a military intervention in Libya. This makes it possible to isolate the effects of electoral interest on government decision making and to scrutinize the explanatory power of the “electoral politics” argument.

The next section will introduce the method of counterfactual reasoning and discuss our counterfactuals in light of established methodological standards. The subsequent section will investigate how German foreign policy on Libya would likely have unfolded in the counterfactual condition. The conclusion will wrap up our argument about the role of electoral politics for Germany’s opposition to mission “Unified Protector.”

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Counterfactuals can be understood as “subjunctive conditional[s] in which the antecedent is known or supposed for purposes of argument to be false” (Levy 2008:629). Even though a growing number of historians and IR scholars make use of counterfactuals (for recent examples see Harvey 2012; Lebow 2010; Goertz and Levy 2007; Ferguson 1999), it is still a highly disputed scientific method. Critics contend that there is no way of systematically doing research about events

which did not happen (Taylor 1954:513; Fischer 1970:15–21) – and that counterfactual reasoning is thus a fruitless and unscientific business.

Types of Counterfactuals and Criteria for Assessing their Quality

Such criticism can be responded to on three grounds. First, the differences between factual and counterfactual worlds are far from being as clear-cut as the critics suggest. Every statement on cause-effect relationships by necessity entails an often implicit counterfactual argument (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:5; Levy 2008:629; Lebow 2010:30–37; Harvey 2012:23–24, 37). As a consequence, avoiding counterfactuals altogether is hardly a viable option:

Whenever we make the apparently factual claim that factor X made a critical causal contribution to outcome Y, we *simultaneously* make a critical counterfactual claim that, in a logical shadow universe with factor X deleted, outcome Y would not have occurred. (Tetlock, Lebow, and Parker 2007:18)

If, for instance, we think that neo-conservatives in the Bush administration were ultimately responsible for the 2003 Iraq War, we simultaneously assume that a hypothetical Gore administration with a different ideological outlook would have followed another course (Harvey 2012). Only if we eschew all causal inference and confine ourselves to purely descriptive analysis would we be able to abstain from counterfactual reasoning (Wenzlhuemer 2009:32). Thus, rather than questioning counterfactual thinking per se, we should attend to what can be seen as appropriate standards for judging the quality of specific counterfactual arguments (Fearon 1991:170).

Second, few if any counterfactuals condone ungrounded speculations on alternative courses of history. While it is true that counterfactuals are sometimes used to demonstrate the contingency and nonlinearity of the social world (see Lebow 2010), this can still be done in a systematic and inter-subjectively understandable way. So-called *ideographic counterfactuals* (Levy 2008:631) use in-depth case-specific knowledge on the motives, beliefs, and constraints of decision makers in an effort to explore, for example, whether the Russian revolution was indeed inevitable after the defeat of the Czarist armies in World War I (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:7). The objective, to paraphrase Harvey (2012:37), is to scrutinize standard accounts of historic events and processes. This is being done by shedding light on empirical evidence that is sidestepped or ignored by conventional approaches (Harvey 2012:37). In the case of Harvey's analysis of US policy on Iraq, such evidence comprises, among other things, the worldviews of Al Gore and his political advisers which would likely have played a leading role in the foreign policy decision making of a counterfactual Gore presidency.

Other types of counterfactuals, however, serve completely different purposes. "*Miracle world* counterfactuals" (Lebow 2010:44) might, for instance, reveal unspoken assumptions and hidden value judgments behind political worldviews (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:13–14; Wenzlhuemer 2009:44–46) without any claim to historical plausibility. Lebow (2010:44) provides an illustration of this kind of counterfactual argument when he puts the question what the international community would have done in South Sudan if it had been inhabited by a Caucasian rather than black population.

Still another use of counterfactuals relates to the traditional tasks of evaluating and testing general theoretical claims. *Nomothetic counterfactuals* (Levy 2008:631) specify "observable implications" of general propositions (King et al. 1994:28–29, 109–112) and guide the search for "corroborative correlational evidence" (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:10). As a case in point, the democratic peace thesis logically implies the absence of war in a counterfactual international system that

is made up only of democratic states. For this to be valid, in turn, we should expect to find some corroborative evidence in the factual world. For example, the political memoirs of democratic leaders should more often refer to political constraints on war-fighting than their authoritarian counterparts (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:10).

A third response to the critics of counterfactuals, moreover, would challenge the assumption (Fischer 1970:19) that every counterfactual is equally hypothetical. Specifically, the methodological literature suggests a number of criteria for assessing and comparing the quality and usefulness of counterfactual claims (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:16–31; Levy 2008:632–540; Lebow 2010:54–57).² For one thing, antecedents and consequents need to be well specified, that is, they must meet the criterion of *clarity* (Levy 2008:632; Lebow 2010:54).

Another criterion “requires that if the counterfactual assertion had been true [...] nothing else would also have been different in a way that would have materially affected the outcome” (Fearon 1991:195; see also Goodman 1973:9–17). This is closely related to the more general “minimum rewrite of history rule” (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:23) which tells us to avoid major interventions in the course of factual history. The methodological problem involved here resembles the difficulties in experimental settings or comparative case-studies of holding third variables constant. While “surgical counterfactuals” are certainly unrealistic (Lebow 2010:50), ripple effects from counterfactual manipulations and other interactions between variables should be made explicit and minimized as much as possible.

Still another criterion holds that counterfactual arguments should not contradict well-established theoretical and statistical generalizations (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:25–30). Since there are few such regularities and theoretical generalizations in IR, however, this benchmark appears problematic in our discipline and should not be overemphasized. Last but not least, counterfactuals have been assessed against the principle of *projectability* (Tetlock and Belkin 1996:30–31), that is they are expected to tease out as many observable implications of the connecting principles as possible which can be corroborated by empirical evidence.

Constructing Comparative Counterfactuals about Germany’s Policy on Libya

Recall that the purpose of our exercise in counterfactual reasoning is to evaluate the explanatory power of “electoral politics” arguments for Germany’s policy on Libya in 2011. This most closely resembles the rationale for *ideographic counterfactuals*. Methodologically, our research objectives require us to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of two competing counterfactual claims:

Counterfactual A: *If there had not been upcoming state-level elections, the Merkel government would have voted for Resolution 1973 and would have participated in mission “Unified Protector” in Libya.*

Counterfactual B: *If there had not been upcoming state-level elections, the Merkel government would still have abstained on Resolution 1973 and would still not have participated in mission “Unified Protector” in Libya.*

This method has been introduced as comparative counterfactual analysis (CCA) by Harvey (2012). It is based on the insight that “the quality of a counterfactual claim cannot be evaluated in isolation” (Harvey 2012:34)

² It should be noted that there are counterfactuals for which these criteria do not apply, because they serve other purposes than theory-testing or explanation. The best cases in point are so-called “miracle world counterfactuals” (Lebow 2010:44–46).

because the strengths of one version of history automatically reveal weaknesses of the other. Accordingly, any analysis that considers only one counterfactual without taking into account the plausibility of its mirror image runs the risk of being incomplete and biased in favor of preferred readings of history (Harvey 2012:34–35).

Given this set-up, how useful are our counterfactuals and how do they score on the criteria discussed above? As regards the demand for clarity, we contend that the antecedent and consequent are indeed unambiguously defined. Second, we are confident that the counterfactuals meet the criteria of the minimum rewrite of history rule. The antecedent, that is, the absence of elections, is unlikely to cause significant ripple effects as it is difficult to imagine how a different electoral calendar could have affected the international agenda, the constellation of interstate interests or indeed the national security concerns of the German government. Neither was the timing of regional elections in any way related to the timing of elections to the German federal parliament, the Bundestag. It is therefore highly plausible to assume the same distribution of seats in the Bundestag and the same domestic power position of the Merkel government in the counterfactual as in the factual world.

At the same time, there is no systematic reason which would have made it improbable that the elections to the state parliaments of Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate had been scheduled differently. Rather, one can point to a number of plausible mechanisms which could have brought our counterfactuals into being. In the case of Baden-Württemberg, for example, a further escalation of a series of massive protests against a local railway project, beginning in late 2009, would almost certainly have caused a major political crisis and may well have led to the resignation of the liberal-conservative government and to snap elections.

Even in the absence of such extraordinary events, both state-level governments had been free to choose among a range of possible election dates back in early 2010 – specifically they could have selected any Sunday between 20 March and 15 May 2011 in the case of Rhineland-Palatinate or between 20 March and 24 April 2011 in the case of Baden-Württemberg. Given the endless contingencies which might have impacted on these rather low-profile decisions, it appears not at all far-fetched to regard a different regional electoral calendar as plausible. In any case, our counterfactuals do not introduce any changes that would have been impossible in view of inescapable historical facts. This distinguishes our counterfactuals from Lebow's example of a miracle world counterfactual (Lebow 2010:44), which imagines Western Sudan as being inhabited by Caucasians and would thus indeed be a highly implausible aberration from the course of factual history.

To ensure that our counterfactuals meet the criterion of projectability, moreover, we need to specify theoretically plausible influences on decision making that are not connected to electoral considerations. Also, we have to indicate observable implications of these influences that can be corroborated or disproved by empirical data. In view of established accounts of (post-unification) German foreign policy, three factors, each located at a different level of analysis (Waltz 2001), are particularly relevant in this regard:

1. Beliefs and worldviews of decision makers in the foreign policy executive consisting of the head of government and the departmental ministers responsible for foreign policy, most notably the foreign minister (Hill 2003:56–62). Such factors have been explored, for example, in research on the national role conceptions (Mauß 2001; Oppermann 2012) and operational codes (Malici 2006; Brummer 2011) of key members of the German foreign policy executive, in particular the Chancellor and the foreign minister.

2. Intraparty and coalition politics. These variables reflect existing research on the foreign policy preferences of German political parties (Rinke 2006) and intra-coalition dynamics in foreign policy decision making (Kaarbo and Lantis 2003).
3. International repercussions of foreign policy decisions and their evaluation by decision makers. This perspective is grounded in the literature on the Federal Republic's traditional *raison d'état* to establish itself as a respected and influential partner in Western multilateral political institutions (Besson 1970; Kirchner and Sperling 1992) and the long-standing priority of German governments not to frustrate the normative expectations of its major allies in NATO and EU. (Hellmann 2006:97–111)

More specifically, the significance of these potential drivers of German foreign policy comes from the following considerations: First, if decision makers in the foreign policy executive responsible for Germany's approach toward Libya had previously expressed skepticism about the appropriateness of military intervention under comparable circumstances (except for the electoral politics context) and if the arguments put forward resemble the justifications given for German nonparticipation in the case under study, there will be reason to believe that the latter reflect genuine beliefs and concerns.

Second, intraparty and coalition politics are relevant inasmuch as they reflect restrictions on Germany's participation in international military missions which may have been influential before and during the decision-making process and which are not necessarily linked to immediate electoral concerns.³ For example, if significant factions of (one of) the ruling parties had opposed the use of military force under circumstances that were similar to our case (except for the electoral calendar) and if they continue to hold these positions at the time of decision making on Libya, intraparty and coalition politics would emerge as a plausible driving force behind German nonparticipation.

Third, another possible explanation for German decision making rests on the anticipated international consequences. These consequences may either have been misjudged and underestimated or generally dismissed as being of little relevance by decision makers. Evidence to this effect would undermine the case that the German government have willingly accepted serious international consequences to realize electoral gains and thus reduce the causal weight to be attached to the electoral politics argument. The following counterfactual case study discusses how these three potential drivers of decision making would have affected German policy on Libya in the absence of immediate electoral incentives and which of our competing counterfactual claims they would support.

Germany and NATO's Military Intervention in Libya

Electoral politics explanations for Germany's abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 1773 on 17 March 2011 and its nonparticipation in the NATO mission "Unified Protector" tend to focus on the electoral incentives of the junior partner to Angela Merkel's coalition government, the FDP, in the run-up to the regional elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate which were due just 10 days after the UN Security Council vote on Libya. Given the FDP's extremely poor showing in opinion polls and the unpopularity of its foreign minister Guido West-

³ It is important to analytically distinguish between broader domestic considerations related to party and coalition politics and more specific and immediate electoral pressures. Although both sets of incentives are ultimately driven by a concern with government stability and survival, the influence of narrow electoral calculations on decision-makers depends on the electoral calendar. The further away elections are, the less convincing it is to assume that decision-making is driven by electoral incentives.

erwelle, then also still party chairman and vice-chancellor, these elections were seen as crucial for the political prospects of the FDP and of Westerwelle personally as well as for the overall stability of the coalition government. What is more, Guido Westerwelle is credited with having been a leading force in predetermining the coalition's approach to Libya and he is seen as having used the authority of his office to shape Germany's policy of abstention and nonparticipation as a tactical electoral ploy to resuscitate his and his party's political fortunes (Rühl 2011:564–566; Maull 2012:35–36; Miskimmon 2012:395–396).

Beliefs and Worldviews

Accordingly, the following assessment of the likely trajectory of government decision making in the absence of imminent elections puts an emphasis on the relevant foreign policy beliefs of Westerwelle. The starting point, here, is that Westerwelle's position in the German foreign policy executive and as foreign minister, vice-chancellor and leader of the junior coalition partner would have made him as central to government decision making in the counterfactual world as in the factual world. Moreover, there are three types of empirical evidence which jointly provide a good indication of the position Westerwelle would likely have taken on Libya if it had not been for immediate electoral incentives.

The first piece of evidence relates to Westerwelle's position on the Arab Spring more broadly, which he has articulated in response to the developments in Tunisia and Egypt in January and February 2011. This position reveals a deep skepticism regarding outside intervention into the popular uprisings in the Arab world. While the foreign minister left no doubt that the German government "stands unconditionally on the side of democracy – be it in Tunisia, be it in Egypt" (Westerwelle 2011a:9768), he was also adamant that the uprisings were ultimately a matter of the Egyptian and Tunisian people and that any impression had to be avoided that they were "an affair of the West, an affair of foreign governments" (Westerwelle 2011b:9964). Whereas Westerwelle took the lead in drawing up a plan for "swift and targeted economic support" for democracy in the Middle East (quoted in *The Times* 2011:8), he insisted that the sovereignty of Arab societies to take matters into their own hands must not be put into question: "We want to help, not to patronize" (Westerwelle 2011b:9964). Perhaps most pointedly, the foreign minister has expressed his attachment to the principle of nonintervention into the internal affairs of the Arab countries with regard to Egypt at a time when it was still in the balance whether the Mubarak regime would indeed fall: "Who will govern the Egyptian people is not our business, but it is the business of the Egyptian people itself" (Westerwelle 2011b:9963).⁴

It was precisely this determination of Westerwelle not to become involved in the question of President Mubarak's resignation which earned him a rebuke from a leading member of the largest German opposition party, the SPD, who invoked the "responsibility to protect" to challenge the notion that the fate of the Egyptian uprising can be shrugged off as an internal affair (Wieczorek-Zeul 2011:9974). Although a military intervention in Egypt or Tunisia was never on the cards, Guido Westerwelle's well-documented preference for Western non-interference in the Arab Spring, which he expressed in the absence of any discernible domestic electoral incentives, suggests that he would have been equally reluctant to support any military mission to help the Libyan rebels in toppling the Gaddafi regime in the counterfactual world.

⁴ The foreign minister essentially took the same position in response to the news of violent clashes between government and opposition in Bahrain in March 2011: "A solution must be sought within the country itself" (Westerwelle 2011c:10815).

Second, the long-standing views of Guido Westerwelle and the FDP on the use of military force in general further add to the expectation that the foreign minister would have been no less skeptical about a German contribution to mission “Unified Protector” under counterfactual conditions. These views are marked, in particular, by a strong attachment to the Federal Republic’s traditional “culture of restraint” (Baumann and Hellmann 2001:62–63) in military affairs and, closely related, by the conviction that military force can only ever be legitimate as a means of last resort. For example, Westerwelle spelled out the guiding principles of his foreign policy in a keynote address little more than one year into his term in office and without any immediate electoral pressures: “Germany will continue to advocate a culture of restraint with regard to the use of military force. It is always a weapon of last resort” (Westerwelle 2010).

This position reflects the FDP’s well-established line that “the use of military means can only be the *ultima ratio*” (FDP 2009:67) which the party cherishes as part of the legacy of its highly regarded former foreign minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher. While the FDP has clearly not consistently opposed foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr as a matter of principle, it has long carved out a reputation of endorsing such deployments only in exceptional circumstances under the condition that it recognizes a strong case that all alternative means have indeed been exhausted.

This line has also been at the heart of the FDP’s criticism from the opposition benches of the 2005–2009 CDU/SPD grand coalition under Angela Merkel, which Westerwelle invoked already early on in the legislative period. Most notably, he repeatedly accused the coalition of pursuing a “Militärangebotspolitik” (quoted in Frankfurter Rundschau 2006:6), that is, a policy of prematurely offering German contributions to international military missions. As a case in point, Westerwelle criticized the CDU’s defense minister at the time, Franz Josef Jung, for carelessly abandoning the “culture of restraint” when he appeared to suggest in November 2006 that Germany would stand ready to deploy the Bundeswehr to Darfur should this become necessary (Welt 2006a:4). More generally, Westerwelle took issue with what he perceived as a trend toward a less restrained approach to military options in the German foreign policy discourse:

It is wrong that, by now, the deployment of German armed forces is discussed already at the beginning of many foreign policy debates. The military is the last, not the obvious solution. [...] The deployment of German soldiers must always remain the exception [...]. In my view, Germany’s power and influence in the world depend on humanitarian credibility and economic strength – and not on military presence. (Westerwelle 2006a:5)

As regards the case of Libya, therefore, the foreign minister’s opposition to any German involvement in a military enforcement of a no-fly zone is consistent with his and his party’s well-documented skepticism toward foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr. In particular, Westerwelle’s insistence that the use of military force should only be considered as a last resource finds its echo in one of the key reasons given by the foreign minister for Germany’s opposition to mission “Unified Protector,” which was that a tightening of economic sanctions would have been a viable and not yet fully exhausted alternative to military means (Westerwelle 2011d:11137). This argument should thus not be dismissed as an attempt to dress up electoral considerations, but would likely have been equally influential in shaping government decision making in the counterfactual world.

The third strand of evidence links back to the opposition of Guido Westerwelle and the FDP to Germany’s participation in specific international military operations under the Merkel-led grand coalition. In particular, the FDP went against the government decisions to contribute to EUFOR RD Congo, an EU

mission to assist the UN in providing a secure environment for the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Brummer 2013a), and to lead the maritime efforts of UNIFIL at preventing arms smuggling into Lebanon (Martinson 2012).⁵ These decisions were taken in May and September 2006, respectively, and did not stand in the context of imminent federal or regional elections.⁶ Although the missions in Congo, Lebanon and Libya are obviously very different in a number of important respects, including their political objectives, military intensity, historical context and institutional framework, they still have in common that they called for decisions of the German government on whether or not to take part in multilateral and UN-mandated military interventions which arguably did not implicate any essential or immediate German security interests.⁷

What is most revealing, in this regard, is that the arguments which the FDP invoked against a German contribution to EUFOR RD Congo (Schmitt 2012; Brummer 2013a) closely mirror some of the main concerns raised by foreign minister Westerwelle about a military intervention in Libya. Three points, in particular, stand out.⁸ One, the FDP in both cases justified its position in terms of the risks involved for the German armed forces. Just as Westerwelle emphasized the “incalculable dangers to life and limb of our soldiers” (Westerwelle 2006b:6) in the debate about the operation in Congo, he warned about the “risks of a lengthy mission” (quoted in Deutsche Welle 2011) for the German troops in the case of Libya.

Two, the FDP pointed toward the threats of military escalation inherent in both interventions. In the case of EUFOR RD Congo, the FDP criticized the “ambiguities” of the mandate and the lack of an “overall political concept” which were said to hold the danger of unforeseen spatial and temporal extensions of the mission (Homburger 2006:3105). A few weeks into the operation, Westerwelle felt vindicated in his warnings that the intervention would become a higher-intensity combat mission than expected by the government (Westerwelle 2006c:4505–4506). Along similar lines, one of the core arguments of the foreign minister against German participation in “Unified Protector” precisely was that a military intervention to enforce a no-fly zone could prove a “slippery slope” (Westerwelle 2011e:10816) toward the deployment of ground troops which would make the Bundeswehr “a party in a civil war” (Westerwelle 2011e:10815).

Three, the FDP substantiated its opposition to the two military interventions by questioning their prospects of success. As regards the Congo, the liberals “doubted the sustainability of the effects” (Hoyer 2006a:3239) of the mission:

⁵ It must be noted, however, that the FDP voted in favor of continuing the Bundeswehr’s participation in UNIFIL after it joined the government in 2009. This change of course was facilitated by the fact that the mission proceeded without any major incidence and that the initial concerns of the FDP did thus not materialize.

⁶ In 2007, the FDP also argued against a German participation in operation EUFOR Chad/RCA, an EU military mission in Chad and the Central African Republic which took place in 2008/2009. This mission, however, was hardly discussed in Germany at all, because the grand coalition made it clear early on that there would be no German military contribution to it (Schmitt 2012:72–76).

⁷ This is not to claim that the FDP has opposed all decisions of the 2005–2009 grand coalition to participate in international military missions. In particular, it has voted in favor of Germany’s contributions to UNAMID in November 2007 and EU NAVFOR ATALANTA in December 2008. The decisions to participate in these operations in Darfur and at the Horn of Africa were both essentially uncontested in the German political debate (Brummer 2013b:153–182, 205–244). Rather, the argument is that the cases of EUFOR RD Congo and UNIFIL make for recent precedents in which the FDP has opposed international military missions in the absence of immediate electoral pressures. This serves to reinforce the point that electoral incentives should not be seen as an indispensable prerequisite for the FDP to speak out against foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr.

⁸ In addition, the FDP linked its rejection of EUFOR RD Congo to its general concern with using military force only as the *ultima ratio*. “Perhaps we have already become too accustomed, in critical situations, to resort to the instrument of Bundeswehr deployments when it comes to supporting peacekeeping missions across the globe. However, what seems to disappear from view occasionally, is that deployments of the armed forces, in particular of the German armed forces, can only always be the very last means” (Hoyer 2006a:3238).

It is inconceivable that a country which is bigger than Western Europe can be stabilized with 500 German troops and maybe another 1000 soldiers from other European countries. (Westerwelle 2006b:6)

With respect to mission “Unified Protector,” in turn, the foreign minister expressed doubts that a no-fly zone can be effective “in a country like Libya [...] which is approximately four times bigger than the Federal Republic of Germany” and raised the possibility that the intervention may “weaken rather than strengthen the democratic movements across North Africa” (Westerwelle 2011e:10815).

Moving on to Germany’s contribution to UNIFIL off the Lebanese coast, the domestic debate about this mission was set apart from the debates about other military interventions by the exceptionally prominent role of different interpretations of the lessons to be learned from German history (Martinson 2012:401–403). Correspondingly, the FDP and Guido Westerwelle also explained their opposition against the government decision to participate in the operation primarily in historical terms:

I personally have very fundamental historical objections to a deployment of German soldiers to the Middle East. [...] [We] should keep to the reasons of state which have so far been accepted in Germany: no German armed forces in the Middle East. (Westerwelle 2006c:4506)

At the same time, the FDP complemented its case against Germany’s contribution to UNIFIL with concerns about a possible military escalation of the intervention, which fits into the party’s reasoning in the Congo and Libya cases. Thus, the FDP objected to the “ambiguity of the [United Nations] mandate” (Westerwelle 2006c:4506) and the lack of a clear “political concept,” (Gerhardt 2006:825) which were seen to leave crucial questions on the practical implementation of the mission open and which would therefore hold the danger that the Bundeswehr becomes ever more drawn into the conflict as “a kind of war party” (Westerwelle 2006c:4506). For the FDP, UNIFIL was an “even bigger military adventure” (Nebel 2006:5) than EUFOR RD Congo, a participation in which would risk being counterproductive in that it may undermine Germany’s political contributions to a resolution of the conflict (Hoyer 2006b:4802).

All things considered, the evidence on Guido Westerwelle’s foreign policy beliefs suggest that the foreign minister would have essentially taken the same line against operation “Unified Protector” in the counterfactual world as he indeed did in the factual world. As these beliefs reflect long-standing party policy and have been shared by the broader leadership of the FDP, the intraparty balance of opinion further reinforces the expectation that the junior coalition partner would also have pressed for a policy of nonparticipation in the case of Libya, if it had not been for the upcoming regional elections.

Intraparty and Coalition Politics

As regards intraparty politics, the evidence suggests that the counterfactual world, like the factual world, would not have seen significant pressures from within the FDP on the party leadership around foreign minister Westerwelle to support a military intervention in Libya.⁹ First, as we argue above, it has been

⁹ We acknowledge, however, that it is always likely to be difficult to prove a negative. Also, a more comprehensive account of the intraparty dimension which would have required analyzing in more depth the views of the FDP grassroots on the use of military force and the German response to the Arab Spring is beyond the scope of this article.

the long-standing policy of the FDP, which was confirmed at various party conferences in the past, to be skeptical toward the use of military force and to see it only as a means of last resort. Unlike, for example, recent intraparty debates on European policy (Oppermann 2012:511), there has been no public contestation of this line from within the FDP. Second, neither Westerwelle's broader stance on the Arab Spring nor the decisions of the party leadership to oppose military operations like EUFOR RD Congo or UNIFIL did provoke open dissent in the relevant Bundestag debates from speakers of the FDP (Deutscher Bundestag 2011:9963–9978; Deutscher Bundestag 2006a:3236–3261; Deutscher Bundestag 2006b:4845–4848).

Moreover, what is worth noting about the factual world is that the FDP's regional party organizations in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate hardly ever made use of the Libya issue during their election campaigns. As a case in point, on March 23, 2011, a few days before the elections, the official homepage of the FDP Baden-Württemberg only mentioned the issue under the heading "news from the national party" alongside a diverse selection of other national issues.¹⁰ What is more, a LexisNexis search of German newspapers did not bring up a single reference to Libya of one of the FDP's top candidates in Baden-Württemberg or Rhineland-Palatinate.¹¹ This serves to reinforce our point that intraparty constraints on FDP policy toward Libya would essentially have been the same under counterfactual conditions as in the factual world.

Moving on to coalition politics, there is similarly nothing to suggest that the senior coalition party, the CDU, would have challenged its junior partner's position on Libya any more in the counterfactual than in the factual world. Thus, we would expect the same extent of intra-coalition consensus against German support for mission 'Unified Protector' under both conditions (Rinke 2011:51–52). First, Chancellor Merkel's preoccupation with managing the Eurozone crisis and the government's nuclear policy turn-around after the Fukushima disaster would have made her no less prepared to leave the lead over decision making on Libya to the foreign office and to Guido Westerwelle in the absence of forthcoming regional elections. In fact, it is difficult to see why Merkel should have run the risk of further destabilizing the coalition by going against her junior partner on an issue which was not her top priority and which was within the jurisdiction of the foreign minister. Rather, concerns with the stability and survival of the government would have provided a strong domestic political imperative for the CDU not to contest the FDP line on Libya that is irrespective of and distinct from immediate electoral incentives.

Second, the policy of nonparticipation on Libya fits into the broader thrust of reforms of the Bundeswehr, which both coalition partners had agreed to already in their 2009 coalition treaty (CDU/CSU and FDP 2009:123–125). These reforms were driven, more than anything, by the imperatives of budgetary consolidation and imply a scaled-down ambition for the Bundeswehr in "out-of-area" missions as well as a renewed focus of the German armed forces on multilateral territorial defense (Miskimmon 2012:400). Along these lines, the two coalition partners share a long-standing concern with avoiding an overload of the Bundeswehr, in particular, given Germany's ongoing military engagement in Afghanistan. For example, this point has been invoked by the CDU's defense minister at the time, Thomas de Maizière, to explain Germany's rather small-scale support for

¹⁰ See <http://web.archive.org/web/20110323135334/http://fdp-bw.de/home.php> (accessed: 22 November 2013).

¹¹ Our full-text search included all articles in the category "German Press" between 1 January, 2011 and election day on 27 March, 2011. The search identified a total number of 18 articles which included both references to "Libya" and the names of at least one of the FDP's top candidates in the two regional elections. None of the articles, however, referred to any statements of the FDP candidates themselves about Libya or Germany's abstention in the UN Security Council.

France's UN-backed military intervention in Mali (De Maizière 2013).¹² Again, this concern should have been as relevant for government decision making on Libya under counterfactual conditions as in the factual world.

Third, it is important to reiterate that the "electoral politics" explanation of Germany's policy on Libya primarily focuses on the electoral incentives of the FDP, not the CDU. On the narrow terms of testing this hypothesis, the counterfactual manipulation of taking electoral incentives out of the equation should thus leave the position of the CDU and of Angela Merkel unaffected. All this suggests that key representatives of the senior coalition partner, most notably Chancellor Merkel and defense minister de Maizière, would also have shared Westerwelle's objections against mission "Unified Protector" if it had not been for any regional elections. Thus, Angela Merkel's assessment of possible measures against the Gaddafi regime should have been no less valid in the counterfactual world:

I am sceptical towards a military intervention, however. As Chancellor, I cannot lead us into a mission with highly uncertain prospects. (Merkel 2011)

Anticipated International Repercussions

Finally, an assessment of Germany's likely approach to Libya under counterfactual conditions has to consider the government's calculation of the possible consequences of German nonparticipation on the international level. This is important, in particular, because the "electoral politics" account of the Merkel government's policy rests on the view that decision makers traded off significant international costs regarding Germany's standing with its Western allies against hoped-for electoral benefits. Absent the promise of electoral gains, therefore, the anticipated international repercussions of its policy should have made the German government more inclined toward contributing to the intervention in the counterfactual world. However, two observations appear to contradict this corollary of arguments stressing the role of electoral incentives in government decision making.

First, there is evidence that the German government did not initially expect significant international costs from its nonparticipation in the intervention and that international incentives should thus not have exerted a clear-cut pull toward a German contribution to the mission under counterfactual conditions. In particular, the reluctance of the US to unequivocally come out in favor of the intervention as well as apparent pointers to the effect that France and the UK would not be overly critical if Germany did not support Resolution 1973 and stood apart from its military implementation should have diluted the perceived pressure on the German government to take a more positive stance on the issue irrespective of any electoral considerations (Miskimmon 2012:398). Given that more than half of NATO member states, including Poland and other EU countries, did not make a military contribution to the intervention either, moreover, the Merkel government arguably had some reason for thinking that it was not isolated on Libya (Deutsche Welle 2011). Indeed, there was some discussion in public discourse during the early days of "Unified Protector" about the UK and France, not Germany, being increasingly isolated on this issue within NATO (*The Guardian* 2011).

Second, the broader trajectory of an increasingly self-confident foreign policy of post-unification Germany (Hellmann et al. 2007) would suggest that concerns with its reputation in the Western alliance were not uppermost on the Merkel

¹² The then-defense minister of the CDU, Franz Josef Jung, already warned about the risk of overstretching the capabilities of the Bundeswehr in the context of the debate about EUFOR RD Congo (Schmitt 2012:67). The FDP, then in opposition, also bolstered its case against a German contribution to that mission by making a similar case: "[T]he capacities of the Bundeswehr are fully exhausted" (Niebel 2006:5).

government's list of priorities.¹³ In what has been described as being part of the "normalization" of German foreign policy (Oppermann 2012:506–507), government decisions on the use of military force are increasingly framed in terms of explicit national interests and have become altogether less driven by a preoccupation with meeting the expectations of the Federal Republic's partners than has traditionally been the case. The implication for the counterfactual world, therefore, is that possible anticipated repercussions of the policy on Libya for Germany's standing in the alliance, very much like in the factual world, would not have carried very much weight with decision makers and would therefore not have exerted strong pressure toward German participation in the military intervention (Hellmann 2011).

Most notably, this changed mindset of German foreign policy decision makers has long been evident for foreign minister Westerwelle and the FDP more broadly. Thus, Guido Westerwelle already in the debate about EUFOR RD Congo left no doubt that decisions on Germany's participation in military missions must not be overly subservient to the wishes of its international partners:

Paris calls, Berlin follows – commitments to foreign deployments [of the Bundeswehr] must not follow this pattern. (Westerwelle quoted in Welt 2006b:1)

Rather, the FDP has insisted, for example in the UNIFIL debate, that German contributions to military missions must follow, in the words of the party's general secretary at the time, "our own political interests" (Niebel 2006:5). The very point that there were no German interests involved, moreover, was also a key argument put forward by the grand coalition under Angela Merkel against offering German troops for EUFOR Chad/RCA (Schmitt 2012:74–75). The 2009–2013 conservative-liberal government, in turn, has explicitly laid down the principle that foreign deployments of the Bundeswehr must always be justifiable in terms of German security interests in its Defense Policy Guidelines which were published two months after the decision not to participate in mission "Unified Protector":

Military operations have far-reaching political consequences. In each individual case, there must be a clear answer to the question of whether German interests and the related fulfillment of international responsibility require and justify an operation and what the consequences of nonaction would be. (German Ministry of Defence 2011:4)

By the same token, the Merkel government has put a strong emphasis on the German national interest in explaining its policy of nonparticipation on Libya. Comparing Afghanistan and Libya, Chancellor Merkel, for example, has argued that while the Bundeswehr involvement in Afghanistan contributes to German security, the same could not be said for Libya (Merkel 2011). If anything, defense minister de Maizière was even more explicit in making the same point:

The international community says: [in Libya] can be intervened. And we reserve the right, in the German interest, to say: we will not be involved this time. [...] We are not convinced of this military operation. (quoted in Handelsblatt 2011)

The interest-based justifications of government policy on Libya in the factual world are thus very much in line with similar policy statements of key decision makers in the foreign policy executive in different contexts and reflect a broader

¹³ This is not to say that the coalition was indifferent to the possible loss of international prestige in consequence of its stance on Libya. It is only that the government did not let the anticipation of such costs drive its policy on the intervention. Rather, it made an effort to make good for any damage to its international reputation by offering up to 300 more troops for AWACS reconnaissance flights over Afghanistan in order to reduce the burden on NATO-partners who are engaged in Libya and to send "a political signal of alliance solidarity" (De Maizière 2011:11182).

trend in post-unification German foreign policy. This would suggest, in turn, that the case made by the government against the intervention in Libya was not only an electoral ploy but would also have figured in the counterfactual world.

In summary, the counterfactual analysis suggests that the Merkel government would have pursued essentially the same policy of nonparticipation on mission “Unified Protector” even if it had not been for any immediate electoral incentives. Foreign minister Westerwelle’s prominent role in coalition decision making on this issue and his long-standing foreign policy beliefs, which have been shared by other key representatives of the FDP, would have strongly pushed government policy in this direction and there would not have been serious challenges to such a course on the level of intraparty and coalition politics or as regards the anticipated international costs of the policy.

It is important to note, however, that this finding does not in itself speak to the much debated – and at times recommended – option of voting in favor of Resolution 1973 in the Security Council without participating in its military implementation (Bertram 2011). The government rejected this option primarily on the grounds that it was said to be inconsistent and unsustainable. Specifically, both the Chancellor and the foreign minister argued that endorsing the resolution at the UN would have put Germany under increasing international pressure to offer a military contribution as well, ultimately making the policy of nonparticipation in the intervention impossible to uphold (Rühl 2011:565–566; Westerwelle 2011e:2).

Although the evidence in this regard is sketchy, the above analysis still gives two reasons to expect that the government would also have refrained from decoupling its vote in the Security Council from the question of a military contribution to “Unified Protector” in the counterfactual world. First, such a policy appears out of sync with the notion of an increased self-confidence of German foreign policy which would have left the Merkel government as predisposed to making a vocal case against the political rationale behind Resolution 1973 instead of quietly acquiescing in it under counterfactual conditions as it was in the factual world (Miskimmon 2012:395). Second, the government’s calculation of the international repercussions of its policy would in neither of the two scenarios have strongly pushed decision makers toward voting in favor of Resolution 1973. Rather, the coalition proceeded on the assumption that an abstention only had serious consequences for its reputation within the Alliance, if Germany would thereby bring down the resolution. Had this been the case, however, the evidence is that the Merkel government would have voted with its allies regardless of the forthcoming regional elections (Rinke 2011:52).

Conclusion

The article has set out to scrutinize “electoral politics” explanations of German nonparticipation in the 2011 military intervention in Libya. While scholars have provided many different accounts of what made the Merkel government oppose military action in this case, one prominent argument is that decision making was shaped by the electoral incentives of the government to play to the gallery of an anti-interventionist public opinion in the face of forthcoming regional elections. However, such an argument is inherently difficult to test or falsify using traditional case study methods. At the same time, it implicitly rests on the assumption that government policy would have been different had decision making not taken place in the context of an imminent election. Making this assumption explicit and testing it in a comparative counterfactual analysis has therefore been judged a promising methodological tool to tease out the extent to which electoral considerations have indeed made a difference to Germany’s approach to the Libya issue.

Specifically, the article has constructed two counterfactuals in which decision making on whether to contribute to NATO's intervention did not take place in the context of imminent elections. The research strategy has then been to investigate how different possible explanatory factors in the theoretical toolbox of foreign policy analysis (FPA) on different levels of analysis would have played out in the absence of electoral incentives. Thus, the article has looked at three factors that figure prominently in the debate about Germany's foreign policy since unification: the beliefs of decision makers; intraparty and coalition politics; and the anticipated international repercussions of government decisions.

The main contention of our case study is that German foreign policy would not have been different even if the government had not made its decision in the shadow of forthcoming elections. It was above all the beliefs and influence of foreign minister Guido Westerwelle and the position of the junior coalition partner more broadly which would also have suggested a German policy of nonparticipation in the counterfactual world. The dynamics of intraparty and coalition politics and the Merkel government's assessment of the international consequences of its policy further reinforce this expectation.

In the final analysis, therefore, our counterfactual manipulations lead us to conclude that electoral incentives did not have causal influence on the decision of the Merkel government to oppose the military intervention in Libya. "Electoral politics" explanations of this case of German nonparticipation in an international military mission are thus ultimately unconvincing. This provides a fruitful point of departure for future research which should engage in systematic tests of competing theoretical accounts of German foreign policy on Libya as well as the use of military force more generally. On a broader level, the article suggests that counterfactuals open up a promising route in FPA toward assessing the relative weight of single explanatory variables in the multi-factorial explanations of foreign policy decision making which are one of the hallmarks of the discipline (Hudson 2007:6).

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